



Game in progress: An introduction to Tolkien—or an invitation to sacrilege?

Kids: The Deadliest Game?

It is, according to the sister of 16-year-old Steven Loyacono of Castle Rock, Colo., "a door into the occult"—a door which her brother opened at his mortal peril. The family knew something was wrong when Steven took down his Cheryl Ladd posters and replaced them with pictures of demons; not long after he killed himself with carbon monoxide from the family car. The parents of Michael Dempsey, 15, realized something was wrong when he put a hex on his mother during a backgammon game; not long afterward, following an argument with his father, he shot himself to death. In both cases—and in some 50 other instances of teen-age deaths—the National Coalition on Television Violence and other critics link the aberrant behavior to an obsession that took up as much as 40 hours a week. An obsession with a game: Dungeons & Dragons.

It is almost impossible to give a simple description of the game, which was invented by Gary Gygax, a Lake Geneva, Wis., insurance salesman, in the early 1970s and has sold 8 million copies and spun off a popular cartoon show. The basic components are a set of special dice and hundreds of pages of instructions (although fanatics sometimes collect figurines and elaborate paraphernalia to help them in their fantasies); it is played not on a board but in an imaginary cave populated by goblins, demons, dragons and sorcerers who must be overcome in battle or by guile to collect treasure. But even that makes it sound more conventional than it really is: there are no winners

or losers, and games can go on indefinitely, spinning out evermore elaborate fantasies.

One common criticism that has been leveled against Dungeons & Dragons is that it is a form of sacrilege—"brainwashing," according to Patricia Pulling, who heads an organization called Bothered About D&D; "If kids can believe in a god they can't see then it's very easy for them to believe in occult deities they can't see." "Anybody who plays this game needs some kind of deliverance," says the Rev. Fred Perna of Toronto, where at least one Roman Catholic school system banned the game this summer. Getting Dungeons & Dragons out of the public schools has become a rallying point for fundamentalists in the small Connecticut town of Putnam, where a 13-year-old boy with a passion for the game—and with a number of other personal and family problems—killed himself last April. There, as in most other places where critics have tried to ban D&D, the school board last month refused to act against the game.

The secular objection to D&D is that

players become so wrapped up in its seductive fantasies that they lose contact with reality. "The game causes young men to kill themselves and others," asserts Dr. Thomas Radecki, a psychiatrist and chairman of the National Coalition on Television Violence. "The kids start living in the fantasy... and they can't find their way out of the dungeon." Pulling, who lives in Montpelier, Va., says that is just what happened to her son, Irving, a bright high-school junior who had become so wrapped up in D&D that his grades started to suffer; when another player in a long-running game at his school sent him a curse, she says he interpreted it literally—and shot himself in the heart.

Hansel and Gretel: It may have been incidents such as that which in 1983 led the game's manufacturer, TSR Hobbies, Inc., to include a warning against players identifying too heavily with their game characters. "The more the two are kept apart," the manual advises, "the better your games will be." But in general the

company maintains that it is no more reasonable to assume that youths will kill themselves after playing Dungeons & Dragons than that children will bake themselves in ovens after reading "Hansel and Gretel." The Association for Gifted-Creative Children endorses the game, having found that it encourages the reading of Shakespeare, Tolkien and Isaac Asimov. Director Steven Spielberg used it to test children's role-playing abilities in casting the movie "E.T." Dr. Joyce Brothers, the psychologist, formerly a consultant to TSR, sees no harm in D&D per se, provided it doesn't become an obsession. "Games are just games if you have fun," she says. The overwhelming majority of kids who play Dungeons & Dragons, after all, do not commit suicide, which suggests that the ones who did may have been troubled in other ways. D&D, says TSR spokesman Dieter Sturm, "is being made a scapegoat for the rampant teen-age suicide problem." But with the incidence of teen-age suicide having tripled in the last 25 years, it is not surprising that parents are looking for something to blame.

JERRY ADLER with SHAWN DOHERTY in Chicago and bureau reports



Goblins, demons and ghouls: A warning against identifying too closely

THE FAMILY

Picture caption: *Game in progress: An introduction to Tolkien—or an invitation to sacrilege?*

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